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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER LOSES LIBEL SUIT; DAMAGES  
REDUCED

REF: MINSK 997

Classified By: Ambassador Karen B. Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

11. (SBU) On December 20, a Minsk court ordered independent newspaper "Novy Chas" and journalist Aleksandr Tamkovich to pay USD 22,223 and USD 465, respectively, to top Belarusian MP Nikolay Cherginets for libel (reftel). Despite defense arguments during the proceedings, which were observed by Poloffs, that Tamkovich's article was mainly an analysis of information posted on Cherginets' own website, Judge Alena Ananich ruled that Tamkovich and the paper had defamed the GOB lawmaker by linking him to a controversial Soviet-era criminal prosecution. Nevertheless, "Novy Chas" Editor Aleksey Korol described the award, which amounted to one-tenth of the damages originally sought by Cherginets, as a "small victory" for his paper and pledged to Poloff that he would continue publishing articles critical of the Lukashenko regime. Korol also noted his sincerest thanks to the Embassy for its continuous moral support.

Comment

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12. (C) With a weekly circulation of 3,000, the importance of "Novy Chas," one of the few legally registered independent print outlets for pro-democracy forces, was demonstrated by the courtroom presence of several high-level independent-media, civil-society and opposition leaders -- including United Civic Party Chair Anatoliy Lebedko, Belarusian Popular Front First Deputy Chair Vintsuk Vyachorka, and Belarusian Social Democratic Party "Gramada" Deputy Chair Igor Rynkevich. Despite Korol's "small victory," this case could be merely a shot across the bow in the regime's campaign of repression against independent media organizations in the run up to Belarus' 2008 parliamentary elections.

STEWART